



AH-64 Apaches support MAJ Jason D. Adams and a Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (SF ODA) while in troops-in-contact with Taliban fighters in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. (Photo by MAJ Jason D. Adams)

The Path Less Traveled: Fire Supporters in SOF

One of the most important lessons learned by Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the War on Terrorism (WOT) was the need to integrate joint fires at all levels of operations. Adding joint fires elements (JFEs) to the structure of each special group ensures that special operators integrate all available assets into their operations. To meet the growth requirements, the Field Artillery (FA) is looking for highly motivated fire supporters who have a warrior mindset and can think and adapt to rapidly changing environments.

The Army's transformation created within the SOF community additional fire support positions and expanded the opportunities to develop highly diversified leaders within the FA. Fire support positions have existed within the SOF community primarily throughout the Ranger Regiment, but the bridge into the Special Forces enhances our capabilities as a branch and provides a fire support subject matter expert (SME) to the Special Forces (SF).

Our operational environment has changed since the start of WOT. Today's leaders must be diverse experts in com-

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bined, joint and interagency operations. This applies not only within the conventional realm for today's Warfighter, but also requires an understanding of the dynamics of unconventional forces operating within that environment.

The SF assignment is a challenging, self-motivated and invaluable assignment that should be resourced and maintained to enhance our fire support community now and into the future. As battalion fire supporters in an SF Group, we can say that these types of assignments are worth pursuing based on the prestige of the unit, the experience gained and the opportunities *not* found in other units.

The SF fire supporter's daily duties and responsibilities, in some ways, do not differ from what many battalion-level fire support elements currently conduct in Iraq or Afghanistan. Based on recent operational deployments, most fire support elements operate within a combined

or joint environment and understand the inherent intricacies. The question remains, what makes a position in the SF so different from any other battalion fire support assignment?

One significant difference is that you are a JFE operating across multiple brigade and division boundaries. This requires the members of your element to have highly diverse backgrounds and a strong knowledge base to rely upon. There are many pieces to that puzzle, and the following are some of the major points brought up by former Redlegs who have served within the SF.

Selection. The formal selection process begins with potential candidates contacting their FA assignments branch officer/NCO. The FA assignments branch then narrows the field of applicants by using factors, such as previous fire support experience and previous key developmental position experience. After this process, the selection packets of only the most qualified personnel are forwarded to US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) for review. Applicants whose records meet the USASOC screening criteria are scheduled for an interview.

After all interviews are complete, USA-SOC notifies FA assignments branch of their selections.

Having previous fire support experience is a requirement for fire support assignment with SF units. Staying up-to-date on lessons learned and the emerging trends within the fire support community provides the knowledge and experience to be effective within this staff. Just as important is military transition team (MiTT) experience. This is the closest, most relevant experience in the conventional force that corresponds to one aspect of the Operational Detachment Alpha's (ODA's) mission (see the "A Closer Look at SOF" on Page 20). This is not an essential requirement, but is one that increases the chance to be assigned to an SOF unit.

Schooling and Preparation. Before reporting for duty in an SOF unit, the fire supporter most likely will attend additional schools to prepare him for the uniqueness of the upcoming assignment. The FA Branch is adamant about getting started correctly, so it programs fire supporters to attend courses like the Joint Firepower Course at Nellis Air Force Base (AFB), Nevada, and the Joint Air Tasking Order Process Course at Hurlburt AFB, Florida. After reporting to the SF unit, the fire supporter may attend additional training such as the Special Operations Terminal Attack Controller Course.

An SF fire supporter may work with targeting systems such as Joint Automated Deep Operations Coordination System (JADOCS), Precision Strike Suite for Special Operations Forces (PSS-SOF), Command Post of the Future (CPOF) and my Internet Relay Chat (mIRC). In many cases, he must be the SME as well. Equally important is the management and integration of the Lightweight Countermortar Radars (LCMRs) within the battalion as part of targeting and force protection.

Planning, employment and coordination of these assets are the JFE's responsibility. These are tools that fire supporters must understand and leverage to build an operational picture. To train on these assets, Artillerymen can contact the nearest field service representative or go to the Fires Knowledge Network available through Army Knowledge Online at <http://www.us.army.mil>.

Additionally, an SF fire supporter wears multiple hats as he most likely will be one of the more senior officers or NCOs within the operations center. Fire supporters should have an operational mindset going

into an SF assignment and get the training necessary before arriving. It is not atypical to in-process the unit and, within 30 days, deploy on an operational mission.

The learning curve for those selected for SF positions is steep. If a leader cannot operate independently and provide relevant recommendations to the commander, then these assignments are not recommended. Some SF commanders have fire support experience and will call a newly assigned fire supporter out immediately to determine if he is worth his weight in salt. An SF fire supporter must study fire support doctrines and tactics, techniques and procedures; learn and know his craft; and be able to apply it without hesitation.

Arrival. Establishing oneself within the SF battalion goes beyond being the SME in this community. Being physically fit and mentally strong are the fastest ways to build rapport and demonstrate that he is not a physical liability. This goes hand in hand with self motivation. No one here is going to tell someone to do physical training or that he needs to do his homework. Not doing so quickly results in being marginalized. In an environment that tends to be decentralized, it is essential to interface personally with each company and team to ensure they know what the fire supporter can do for them.

Fire supporters must have a thorough knowledge of the targeting process in both the lethal and nonlethal arenas. Lethal targeting goes beyond the aspect of planning for and calling fire support assets such as Artillery, close air support (CAS) and air-ground integration with rotary wing assets. Understanding personality-based targeting is part of precision fires, which must be implemented to put the right effect against the desired target. With internal defense forces taking over security missions, fire support officers (FSOs) must apply their subject matter expertise and understand targeting principles to achieve the desired effect a team is requesting for any given operation.

As for nonlethal targeting, fire supporters must understand networks of influence and how they support developing future operations. Not everything done in the SF world is kinetic, and the relationships

ODAs build are instrumental to the overall success of the Special Operations Task Force (SOTF). For example, integrating electronic fires to disrupt enemy early warning as the essential task for shaping the operation allows an ODA with its partnered foreign internal defense unit to accomplish the mission successfully.

The capability to target specific networks of influence can undermine an enemy network's center of gravity to exploit for future kinetic operations. This type of targeting is a critical line of effort for the SOTF. The targeting methodology we use for this is Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, and Disseminate (F³EAD). Fire supporters should become intimately familiar with this methodology, because it works.

Operations. What truly makes SF fire support positions unique is the partnership and coordination required at this level. The SF battalion, when deployed, serves as the SOTF and typically is partnered with a division headquarters. FSOs must understand this and know that much of what happens at the SOTF level is cross referenced with a conventional force division or brigade combat team (BCT), at the minimum. Many times that partnership requires the FSO to coordinate at levels



CPT William W. Earl runs in the St. Patrick's Day 13.1 mile half-marathon hosted by Special Operations Task Force North in Iraq. Physical Fitness is a personal as well as professional responsibility in the Special Forces. (Photo by SPC Benjamin Fox)



A four man team approaches a building during a Special Forces training event at the Muscatatuck Urban Training Center in Indiana, 9 December 2009. The muzzles on their M4 assault rifles are modifications made to enable the weapon to shoot clay bullets, making the training more realistic. (Photo by SPC John Crosby, Camp Atterbury Public Affairs)

much higher than what typical battalion FSOs execute.

SF fire supporters must become familiar with how a division headquarters and the multiple entities within that level to include the corps function because the relationships built there can make or break the ability to integrate assets. Information is a powerful asset and not having the

manpower found at the division level means pulling a lot of data from them to build your operational picture and support the teams.

The JFE also conducts targeting and plans and coordinates fire support for 18 ODAs, sometimes conducting concurrent operations. Generally, SOTF mission planning is bottom-up driven; meaning

that the ODAs plan the mission, and the SOTF coordinates and requests assets to support the mission.

The driving factor in the planning process is targeting. The ODAs mainly target high-value individuals or cells such as improvised explosive device cells. These types of targets are event-driven targets and rely heavily on integrating several intelligence disciplines at once to identify and track the targets. Access to intelligence assets in the SOTF is quite robust with human intelligence (HUMINT), signal intelligence (SIGINT), communications intelligence (COMINT), and imagery intelligence (IMINT) capabilities represented in the S2 cell.

This ability is vital during the entire targeting process and can range from a local source providing HUMINT to national-level assets providing COMINT. Not only are these assets necessary for operations planning, but often essential to executing the plan. It is essential that the JFE personnel have a Top Secret clearance so that they can access all intelligence assets and be included in every piece of targeting with the S2.

Planning for each ODA mission is similar to planning for a maneuver company, except for getting the fire support assets normally given to battalion or

A Closer Look at SOF

Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) consist of Special Forces (SF), Ranger, Special Operations Aviation, Psychological Operations (PSYOPs), Civil Affairs (CA), as well as Signal and Combat Service Support (CSS) units.

Special Operations are defined as operations conducted by specially trained, equipped and organized Department of Defense forces against strategic or tactical targets in pursuit of national military, political, economic or psychological objectives. These operations may be conducted during periods

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of peace or hostilities. They may support conventional operations, or they may be undertaken independently when the use of conventional forces is either inappropriate or infeasible.

The mission of the Special Forces Groups is to plan, prepare for and, when directed, deploy to conduct unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, special reconnaissance and

direct actions in support of US national policy objectives within designated areas of responsibility.

The units continually train to conduct unconventional warfare in any of its forms—guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, subversion and sabotage. The Soldiers are schooled in direct action operations and special reconnaissance. Approximately 1,400 Soldiers are assigned to each group.

A-Team. The 12-man A-Team is the key operating element of the SF Group. The primary operational element of a Special Forces (SF) company, an A-Team, consists of 12 SF Soldiers—two officers and 10 sergeants. All team members are SF qualified and cross-trained in different skills. They are also multilingual. The A-Team is almost unlimited in its capabilities to operate in hostile or denied areas.

A-Teams can infiltrate and exfiltrate their areas of operations by air, land or sea. An A-Team can operate for an indefinite period of time in remote locations with little or no outside support. They truly are independent, self-sustaining “detachments.” A-Teams routinely train, advise and assist other US and allied forces and other agencies, while standing by to perform other special operations as directed by higher authorities. All detachment members are capable of advising, assisting and directing foreign counterparts in their functions up through battalion level.

higher echelons. Nonorganic fire support assets include CAS from US and Coalition fixed-wing aircraft, indirect fire support from 105-mm, 155-mm and High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems/ Multiple-Launch Rocket Systems, attack helicopters and now armed unmanned aerial vehicles such as the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper. In certain cases in Afghanistan, there are 105-mm platoons living with and providing direct support to ODAs.

Each ODA has a joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) attached, and it is the JFE's responsibility to receive and process all air support requests (ASRs) for CAS and electronic warfare assets from all 18 JTACs. The JFE tracks the ASRs all the way from the JTAC through the air tasking order process until it is either not supported or supported. If supported, the JFE informs the JTAC on the mission-related data, such as aircraft type, call signs and time-on-station. CAS accounts for the vast majority of fire support assets provided to an ODA due to the distances required and the limited availability of the other fire support platforms.

There is a higher level of responsibility and expectations of a fire supporter assigned to an SOF JFE. He is the fire support coordinator for an area the size

of a division area of operations; he has 18 subordinate elements depending on his ability to plan and coordinate fire support assets for each of them. He has access to more intelligence and joint fire support assets than he would in a typical battalion or BCT. And he must be able to manage it all concurrently 24 hours a day.

This is a rewarding assignment. Do not lose sight of that goal. What we are doing now is one "stepping stone" that strengthens the capabilities for both the Special Forces and Redleg communities. Military Occupational Specialty 13F Fire supporter Specialists, 131A Field Artillery (FA) Targeting Technicians and Area of Consideration 13A FA Officers who are interested in a Special Operations assignment should contact their assignments officer/NCO to discuss required qualifications.

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Rangers. Rangers are the masters of special light infantry operations. These include attacks to temporarily seize and secure key objectives and other light infantry operations requiring unique capabilities. Like their Special Forces counterparts, Rangers can infiltrate an area by land, by sea or by air.

Aviation. The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment is a unique unit. It provides support to SOF on a worldwide basis with three types of modified helicopters. The capabilities of the aviation units include inserting, resupplying and extracting US and allied SOF personnel. They also aid in SOF search and rescue, and escape and evasion activities. In addition to general aviation support to the SOF community, these units provide airborne command and control, and fire support.



PSYOPs. PSYOPs' mission is to disseminate truthful information to foreign audiences in support of US goals and objectives. PSYOP units accomplish their missions by disseminating messages in the form of leaflets, posters, broadcasts and audiovisual tapes. Each unit has its own intelligence and audiovisual specialists.

CA. The CA units are designed to prevent civilian interference with tactical operations, to assist commanders in discharging their responsibilities toward the civilian population and to provide liaison with civilian government agencies. In late 1995, the US Army Special Operations Support Command (Airborne) was formed to centrally manage signal and combat service support to SOF units.

Signal and CSS. The 112th Special Operations Signal Battalion (Airborne) provides communications links and service between the command, joint controlling agencies or commands, and US Army special operations commands in two theaters of operation.

The 528th Special Operations Support Battalion (Airborne) enhances US Army Special Operations Command's medical, maintenance, supply and transportation capabilities.

MAJ Jason D. Adams and an SF ODA observe the effects of AH-64 Apache support while in troops-in-contact with Taliban fighters in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. (Photo by MAJ Jason D. Adams)
